Toward an Honest Religion
Matthew 13:24-30
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Somehow, over the years, the Christian Faith has gotten itself saddled with an image of unreality. Likewise, the Bible, seems to be generally regarded as a book without much relatedness to life. And I suppose nothing briddles me as much as hearing these two ideas expressed because nothing could be further from the truth.

In a recent article on Ecology Time Magazine tried to lay the blame for the pollution of our environment on the first chapter of Genesis and the Christian Faith. Genesis, Time observed, makes the claim that the natural world was made for man to exploit and enjoy. God gave man dominion over nature. Christians have simply assumed that the world is theirs to use in any way they wish - with the result that we are dumping our wastes into the rivers and oceans, spewing our noxious fumes into the air, and destroying oxygen producing vegetation much faster than the enviroment can cleanse itself. That is to say: Biblical Christianity is so far removed from reality that it is responsible for the inexcusable mess in which we now find ourselves.

Now the trouble with that, besides giving the Faith a lead press, is that it is blatently untrue. To be sure, our tradition does establish man as the dominant creature in creation; and it does establish man as the animal given the right to use and enjoy the earth. But it also very clearly states man's responsibility for the world. It clearly defines the world as God's possession, and man as its manager. The Biblical tradition sees man as the steward of nature, and because of that it lays an imperative on every believer to be on the fore front of the belated effort to call a halt to the deathly process of pollution. Time, however, chose to ignore that, and the Christian Faith came off as a dangerously unrealistic idea-system.

Children get the impression that Christian FAith is unreal by observing the behavior of their parents. A home in which prayer never occurs, a home in which the word God is never spoken is, by default, a learning laboratory in Atheism. Children see what goes on in church: compare that with what goes on at home and come to a precisely logical conclusion. Church is irrelevant: Christianity is

unreal.

Those same children go to college and dismiss Christianity without so much as a cursory investigation, because they feel it is totally unrealted to life. After college they join a scientifically oriented culture which is so obsessed with its own technology that it doesn't even take religious faith seriously.

And yet, in a sense, we have no one but ourselves to blame. Christians have, in fact, focused almost totally on the hereafter instead of the here and now. Christianity has been marketed, and is marketed today, as a one way ticket to heaven and nothing else. The Church has happily gone along because eternal salvation is a very marketable item, particularly if one doesn't have to get too upset about the sticky problems of the day.

If you want a field experience in the unreality of popular Christinaity, look sometime at the curriculum which is used in most Sunday Schools - particularly the teaching pictures. My favorite is one that has been around since I was a child. It is a picture of a family. The scene, I presume, is an attempt to portray a typical Sunday afternoon. Father is sitting in a chair, dressed in suit and tie, reading a book. Mother is knitting by the radio. One child is working on a puzzle, the other looking out the window. A dog is sleeping in the corner: everything is immaculate, orderly, clean - and so completely unrelated to reality that it's really no wonder our children are inclined to dismiss Christianity as soon as they can.

Or consider our pictures of Jesus himself: close cropped beard, clean white robes, nearly blond with anglo-saxon features, surrounded by happy plump children, usually in a field of flowers. Compare that image with the picture of life today in a typical Arab village. And you will begin to get a feel for the unreality we have craated around ourselves.

Our art work, such as it is, is merely one small reflector of the total image Christianity displays to the world. That image, somehow, still includes the individual Christian who just isn't with it: who shuns worldly pleasure, is sombre and sober, who doesn't enjoy himself much and generally leads a rather dismal life.

That image still prompts dismay and real horror when Christians start talking about the nasty issues of life, such as racism and equality and peace.

Well, the stance of unreality - the stance of basic dishonesty in religion is possible only if we studiously ignore the Bible and what it really says and does not say. Just as Time Magazine could blame Christianity for pollution only by avoiding the whole Biblical tradition - so we can be unreal and dishonest Christians only by not knowing the content of the Bible.

A case in point is our New Testament Lesson this morning. Jesus was talking to his disciples about the Kingdom. He was using the best rabbinical teaching tool - the parable - the story. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like...." "The Kingdom of Heaven", of course, rings a bell for us and immediately we begin to think about pearly gates a and golden streets; a very popular image of eternal life, including singing hymns and praying, which once prompted Mark Twain to wonder why in the world so many people were anxious to get there.

Actually "Kingdom of Heaven" is Matthew's idiom for "Kingdom of God", and it is not a place, but a state of being; that state of being in which God, and no one else is King. Jesus, apparently, had in mind something - not at all confined to life after death, but a reality in the present moment. The Kingdom of Heaven - we might call it salvation - is a state of being in which a Christian lives now, and which extends beyond his death into eternity.

And so Jesus spent a lot of time telling his disciples about it. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." and this time he told a rather remarkable little story. A man planted good seed in a field. One night an enemy sowed weeds in the same field. When the weeds began to grow among the wheat the man's servant got very upset and suggested that they get about the job of pulling them out. But the man declined, pointing out that a lot of good wheat would be ruined if they did that. Instead they would allow the wheat and weeds to grow together, and at harvest time separate and dispose of the weeds.

The fact that Jesus told a story like that as a description of the Kingdom of God ought to tell us a great deal about the nature of Christian FAith and life.

Religion has to do with the immediate: the present: the now. Religion has to do with the stuff of life, even such mundane matters as a field of wheat and weeds. Christian Faith is honest and realistic, or it is not Christian Faith.

The point of the story, I believe, in that it is imperative to be real and honest in our religion. The story directs us in the way of realism. There are weeds. Can it be that Jesus was suggesting that there are weeds in the Kingdom of God? I think so. \ I think he was saying that even in the Christian life, the way of discipleship, things are not always 100% right, pure and altogether clear. And those who expect the faith to be this - to provide clear answers for all questions, to solve all problems, or to fill one with a warm, contented happiness all of the time are in for a rude shock.

Christianity takes reality seriously. Christianity takes man seriously. Men are never altogether good and those who would dismiss the Church because its members are not paragons of charity and moral virtue haven't the foggist notion what Christianity is all about.

It is tragic that the Church in the past has used this story to justify the kind of activity it seems to prohibit. The wheat and weeds did eventually get separated· the weeds were burned. And on this basis zealous churchmen have looked for the weeds in their midst, and called them heretics, and proceeded merrily to burn them too. That doesn't happen anymore, and yet there are more sermons occuring at this moment verbally weeding you and me out of the Kingdom of Heaven than I care to contemplate. Isn't it interesting, though, that the wheat and weeds were allowed to grow together in the story? And that the final solution was left until the harvest. That's what Jesus was saying: let the decision about where aman will spend eternity in the hands of God. You get on with the task of growing.

I'm always amused and a little alarmed whenever I hear anyone advocate weeding the garden - in or outside the Church. Then are those, for instance, who feel that we do a service to the truth by preventing Communism from being taught in the schools, or by denying a pass port to a Marxist economist, or by refusing to allow a socialist theoretician to speak at a public university. People feelvery strongly about this,

and yet I get the distinct impression that our Lord would say "let them go - truth will out. It's always dangerous, and ultimately detrimental to the truth, to weed the garden prematurely."

It's a remarkable little story, and we've only begun to investigate the possibilities it opens up. I think its greatest truth is that life - the life you and I have been called to live - is a very ambiguous affair, very much like that field in which the wheat and weeds grew together.

Jean Paul Sartre, the French existentialist and one of the most provocative thinkers of our age, has written a short story entitled The Wall which says the same thing about life as Jesus' parable. The story takes place during the revolution in Spain. Three anarchists are under arrest for sabotage, and are waiting in a dark, damp basement to be shot at dawn. One of them, Pablo, knows the whereabouts of the rebel leader whom the authorities are very much interested in catching. The story describes that torturous night as each man contemplates his own death. Near dawn Pablo has made his peace, death is inevitable: mentally, he has already severed all realtionships with others. Now he is filled only with scorn for his captors. As he is led out to be shot he is given one last chance to save his own life by revealing the hiding place of his friend. In complete scorn he fabricates a wild tale about a shack in some remote graveyard, thoroughly enjoys the vision of the police scurrying on their wild goosechase, and sits down to wait for his execution. Several hours later he is escorted to a dining hall for temporary detainment before his is set free. From a friend he learns that the rebel leader had been forced to flee and had hid in a shack in a graveyard. And for some unknown reason the police knew where he was and shot him on the spot. The story ends.

Well, the great philosopher was saying that life is like that. The best of human efforts sometimes fall flat. Life is a strange mixture of the good and not so good: the brilliant achievment and the tragic accident. Jesus said that too - long before the French philosopher.

The Good News of the Gospel is that we can be that honest about life. The good news is that Jesus Christ came into that kind of world, and lived that kind of life,

and got himself caught in one of the worst ambiguities - he, the Son of God, crucified as a threat to religion. He knows how we feel when we get caught. He knows what we experience when we confront ambiguity in our own lives. He is with us. Christianity is that real.

Amen.

Our father keep us from shallow faith. Give us the courage to be honest about ourselves, our lives and our religion. Help us always to see the reality of your presence - and your involvement in life with us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.